



UFOs: An Assessment of Thirty Years of Official Studies in France

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A detailed, critical re-examination of the main cases in three decades of 'official' French UFO studies finds serious defects and problems, some systemic. The cases do not lend support to the idea of extraterrestrial visits.

DAVID ROSSONI, ERIC MAILLOT, AND ERIC DÉGUILLAUME

France is one of the few countries that maintains a governmental department that collects and investigates UFO reports, more than sixty years after the birth of this phenomenon in the West.

This unit, sponsored by the National Centre for Space Studies (CNES in French), was created in 1977 under the name Study Group for Unidentified Aerospace Phenomena (GEPAN in French). At the time, France had a major infatuation with the UFO phenomenon. The number of cases reported rose considerably, even more so after a wave of sightings in 1973–74. The thirst for alternative theories that

developed after the May 1968 riots and their social and political aftermath, as well as the impact on the imagination induced by man's first steps on the Moon in 1969, created in the following years a favorable cultural climate for the idea of extraterrestrials visiting our planet.

Claude Poher, GEPAN's founder, became very enthusiastic about the topic in 1969 after meeting with famous UFOlogist and astronomer J. Allen Hynek during the preparation of a Franco-American scientific experiment to be carried out aboard the Skylab space station. Hynek showed Poher the inquiry files he had gathered when he was a scientific adviser to the U.S. Air Force. As soon as he got back to France, Poher immersed himself in the no less famous "Condon Report," which had just ended the Project Blue Book. He came into contact with a privately funded UFO research group and, in his free time, started carrying out his own inquiries and statistical studies. For many years, he lobbied within the CNES to create a department dedicated to the scientific study of UFOs. He achieved his aim on May 1, 1977, even though many of CNES's members would always remain hostile toward the department.

To everyone's surprise, Poher left his position as director of GEPAN at the end of 1978. Today, we know that his decision mainly resulted from the refusal by GEPAN's scientific council to publish his works. His writings were very questionable from a scientific point of view and concluded that nonhuman machines were present in our skies. He was replaced by Alain Esterle, a young engineer trained at Paris's Ecole Polytechnique and at the University of Washington. Under his management, the unit gained a little scientific credibility, but his investigation team clearly remained under the influence of the extraterrestrial hypothesis. In turn, Esterle was induced to leave his duties in 1983 after his unsuccessful attempt to undertake experimental research in magnetohydrodynamics (MHD), a technology that some people then thought was involved in UFO propulsion.

His deputy, Jean-Jacques Velasco, an optical technician, succeeded him. As the director of a tiny department now reduced to a secretary and himself, with very little supervi-

sion from within his hierarchy, he multiplied methodological errors and ambiguous statements relayed by the media for more than twenty years. His missions were partly redefined in 1988 when GEPAN became the Atmospheric Re-entry Phenomena Expertise Department (SEPRA in French). The new unit was mainly in charge of identifying objects entering Earth's atmosphere above France.

In 2004, Mr Velasco, about to retire, published a book in which he affirmed, "as the SEPRA director," that we were being observed by intelligent extraterrestrial beings. As a sanction, the director of the French space agency reassigned Velasco to another department. The CNES's "UFO department" wasn't dissolved but restructured once more: in 2005, it became the Group for Study and Information on Unidentified Aerospace Phenomena (GEIPAN in French), directed by Jacques Patenet, an aeronautical engineer, and under the control of a new scientific council presided by Yves Sillard, a former general director of the CNES, who permitted the creation of the GEPAN in 1977.

For more than thirty years now, successive directors of this department have been inclined to believe that their inquiries demonstrate the existence of unidentified aerospace phenomena (UAP)—to use the terminology in effect within the department—and that UAP are resistant to any available explanation. Poher and Velasco personally assert that at least some of them are artificial objects of extraterrestrial origin.

A similar opinion is still defended less openly by Patenet and Sillard. Their conviction is allegedly "based on evidence collected in France with maximum strictness for a large part." After sorting them, an important number of cases would remain without any explanation, even after "detailed inquiry." According to them, the thesis of extraterrestrial visitors would be "the only one...which, by now, brings a potential prospect for the explanation of phenomena, whose existence is by the way unquestionable."¹

For any scientific mind, such statements require hard evidence. We decided to examine in detail what in their works would suggest a preference for the extraterrestrial thesis rather than less exotic explanations.²

The "variable-geometry" statistics given to the media already show that the directors' claimed methodological strictness has too rarely been applied. Actually, the classification of numerous cases poses a problem. In March 2007, GEIPAN started to make its records available online to the public.³ We can now examine most of the cases processed since the unit's creation, from conclusively explained cases (A classified UAP) to mysteries unsolved after inquiry, despite the quantity and quality of available data (D classified UAP). In between are probably explained phenomena (B classified UAP) and unworkable cases lacking sufficient data (C classified UAP).

David Rossoni is a history archivist who lives in Megève, France; e-mail: david.rossoni@wanadoo.fr. Eric Maillot, a primary school teacher, is affiliated with the Center for Inquiry/France, in Nice; e-mail: erick.maillot@wanadoo.fr. Eric Déguillaume is a member of Observatoire Zététique, Grenoble, France (www.observatoire-zetetique.org), and lives in Lyon; e-mail: eric.deguillaume@orange.fr. This article is their summary of their extended critical review of the French "official" UFO studies in their new book titled *Les OVNI du CNES* ("The UFOs of CNES"; "CNES" is the French coun-

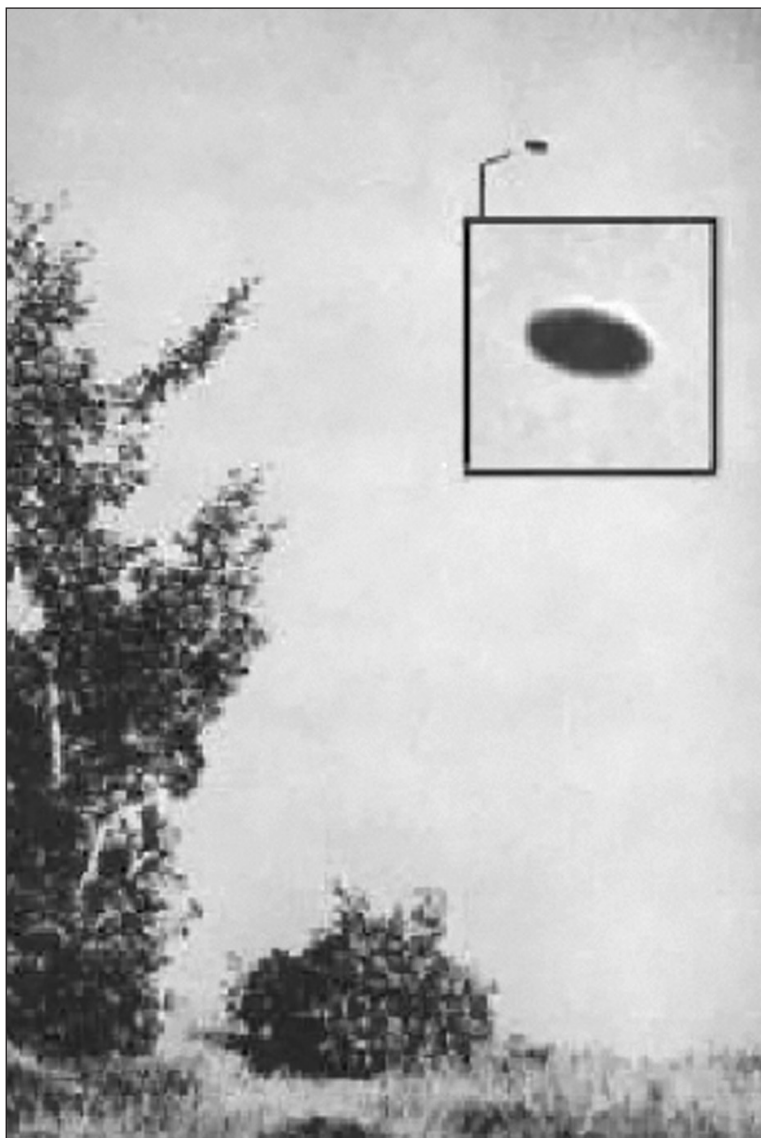


A quick review of these “Class D aerospace phenomena” is enough to ascertain that logical and simple explanations were either not properly entertained or were arbitrarily ruled out. The most elementary mistakes—such as confusing objects of astronomical origin, like Venus or the Moon, with UAP—are numerous. Other events labelled UAP were training sessions by the aerobatic demonstration team of the French Air Force; an unidentified aerospace phenomenon fleetingly seen by a policeman, which was actually electric arcs on frozen catenaries created by a train; and an observation of something above a lake that was, in fact, nothing more than a child’s balloon. One case even involved an alleged mark on a soccer field without any associated aerial phenomenon (Toussus-le-Noble 2001). GEIPAN’s records teem with such “false” D classified UAP.

SEPRA also didn’t do well on sightings that were likely due to reentry of debris into the atmosphere. An obvious atmospheric reentry described in Martinique (Fort de France 1987) and an Aurigid meteor shower seen by pilots (AERO 1998-08-01514) are still D classified UAP. The reentry of an element from a Soviet Proton rocket on November 5, 1990, causing a wave of sightings across the country, provides insight into mistakes made by SEPRA. The inability to identify the phenomenon from its multiple descriptions (though its characteristics are well known, since William K. Hartmann’s work on the matter is part of the Condon Report), vagueness, and factual mistakes are all apparent. Not to mention the discrepancy between the careful official statements from the department and the personal opinions of its director, who was ready to unduly reject the correct explanation, ascribing an allegedly “mysterious” nature to the case.

We have reexamined the main case studies, focusing particularly on the nine observation reports submitted by the department in charge as the most conclusive among thousands of collected reports. Some of them are known worldwide: hundreds of press articles, books, and Web sites mention the Trans-en-Provence case. In 2001, Popular Mechanics magazine summarized the prevailing idea showing it as “the most complete and carefully documented sighting of all time.”⁴ Nevertheless, our own inquiries revealed a series of nearly systemic mistakes.

First of all, CNES’s investigators often excused themselves from thoroughly checking the variety of possible mundane



This photograph, taken by André Fregnale on July 18, 1952, at Lac Chauvet, France, was studied by Claude Poher, director of GEIPAN. Poher deemed that the picture was not a fraud but rather the real article. The photograph is part of a collection of photos that have been filed and studied by the French GEIPAN and the SEPRA state financed investigation committee. (source:UfoCasebook)

explanations for a given case—even though there are only a few such possibilities when the case is well documented—or have hastily dismissed such explanations. As an example, the descriptive details (apparent shape, noise, method of take off, etc.) reported about the amazing object seen at Cussac (August 29, 1967)—a “close encounter of the third kind” that became as famous in France as the one in Kelly-Hopkinsville in the United States—are consistent with a light turbine-powered helicopter (probably an “Alouette II”). Even though no con-

vincing alternative explanation was proposed to this hypothesis, the department rejected it without even the most minimal investigation. In the Bize-Minervois case (January 14, 1974), the shape and behavior of the “unexplainable” phenomenon highly suggests a crop-dusting helicopter, but this likely explanation in this wine-growing area has also been arbitrarily dismissed. During the inquiry about the meeting of “Blaise”—pseudonym of the driver—and a flying machine that allegedly brought his car to a standstill (January 26, 1981), GEPAN wouldn’t explore the possibility of confusion with a medium helicopter (possibly a “Super Frelon”), despite elements in the testimony suggesting that cause.⁵

A strict methodology must be followed to extract reliable data from observation reports. Since the end of the 1970s, the presence of some physical evidence has been vital to demonstrate the reality and originality of the reported phenomenon. But the investigators have often put forward physical traces to which causal links with the alleged phenomenon were very fragile or even clearly absent.

This recurring problem can be seen in many “major” cases. The Christelle case (November 27, 1979) claims that a thirteen-year-old girl was terrorized by the landing of a flying saucer and the sight of one its crew. Even though there was a suspicious series of amalgamated events, such as a neighbor of the girl working outside his house under the high-beam headlights of a big car, GEPAN focused its investigation on a so-called “landing track” discovered by chance by a police constable. Its aspect and location were shown to be inconsistent with the indications given by the child during reconstruction in the field. In the aforementioned “Blaise” case, the problems that affected the automobile were likely due to a misfiring system and to the driver’s panic rather than to any interaction with an alleged cigar-shaped object.

In the Trans-en-Provence case (January 8, 1981), a saucer-shaped object allegedly left two concentric “ground traces,” according to the only witness. According to the police constables who examined the location, these marks were clearly left by the tires of a car “peeling out” on a part of the property where vehicles had recently operated. This obvious lead was never followed by GEPAN. Without this doubtful “material evidence,” which would actually be used to back up the story of a known joker, the department would have ignored this incident.

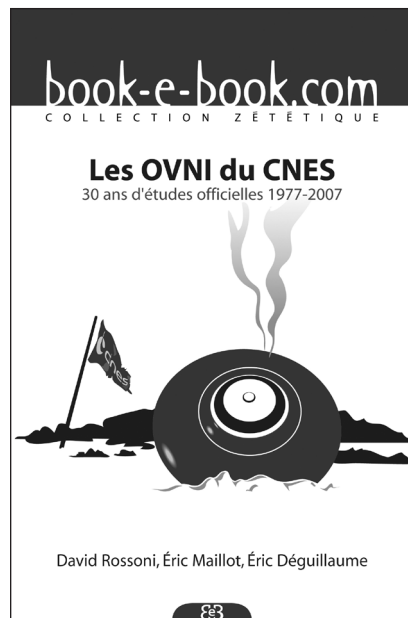
A physical effect—also questionable—has been put forward in the Amaranth case (October 21, 1982) to similarly back up the testimony of a biologist from northeastern France who stated that an unidentified flying object had spoiled a flowering plant in his garden. The floral clusters of the amaranth were in fact simply withered—a very natural phenomenon after an early frost in autumn—but the scientific occupation of the witness prevented the GEPAN from questioning the credibility of his story, though many details suggested a complex visual illusion or hallucination.

The case of Air France Flight 3532 (January 28, 1994)—the case most widely covered by the media in the last fifteen years in France—shows a similar probable cause. Here, the crew of an airliner caught sight of a gigantic bell-shaped object above Paris, detected by military radar at the same time—according to SEPR. But, obviously, this correlation is erroneous: the radar track—probably that of a light aircraft without a transponder flying close to the radar horizon—was actually located on the right and near the plane, while the phenomenon was seen far away on its left. Even so, nothing allows us to formally rule out the possibility that the alleged UAP could have actually been a conventional object observed at an unusual angle (notably, the pilots’ descriptions evoke a “Super Guppy,” a wide-bodied cargo aircraft).

Moreover, many cases that are referred to today were investigated a long time after the alleged events occurred: four years after Bize-Minervois, five years after Air France Flight 3532, and eleven years after Sauvigny-le-Bois and Cussac. In 1978, GEPAN’s Scientific Council advised against looking into cases so old. Such long-delayed inquiries can suffer many potential problems.

First of all, potential evidence could have disappeared or been disturbed. Also, belated interventions in studying alleged physical evidence—added to rather deficient methodology about sampling, preserving, and analyzing the collected samples—would make it impossible to dispel doubts about the real nature of an event. This is especially problematic in the Trans-en-Provence and Amaranth inquiries.

In the same way, some basic checks became nearly impossible. For example, in Sauvigny-le-Bois (February 5, 1967), the witnesses could have been deceived by the lights of an agricultural vehicle turning in a field or by a delivery truck dumping rubbish along the axis of observation. The place’s topography





and the presence of layers of mist near the ground, likely to spread light sources and produce unusual optical effects, would support those simple hypotheses, but they became “nonfalsifiable” during the long-delayed inquiry.

Such long delays in investigating phenomena also have an inevitable impact on eyewitness testimonies. After time, testimonies become distorted and often full of false memories. For example, the study of successive accounts of the two young

However, in October of 2008, the case was still presented as “unexplained” on GEIPAN’s Web site.

We can see that the “facts” quoted in support of the boldest statements of the CNES’s “UFOlogists” are not positive support of phenomena unknown to science. Even less are they proof of extraterrestrial visits. In fact, even if they had to study a case caused by a genuine “exotic” object, they probably could not have managed to articulate it properly because of their

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eyewitnesses in Cussac shows a multiplication of original elements that elevates their story to the realm of fantasy after only a few months lapse. The Bize-Minervois case is based on two allegedly independent testimonies. Actually, the age of recalled facts and a process of mutual influence between the witnesses—who talked together before the arrival of CNES’s agents—again led to the creation of false memories.

The use of various, unscientifically validated methods to assess the physical estimations given by the witnesses, especially angular sizes, don’t make the investigations easier. Once the witnesses’s good faith is “proven,” the investigators have a naïve tendency to consider their estimations as reliable, even more so if in their minds the information comes from people they consider to be “qualified” witnesses (scientists, air traffic controllers, soldiers, etc).

In the case of Flight 3532, the occupation of the main witness was used to eliminate any possibility of mistake from the start, as if aircraft pilots are immune from perceptive and/or cognitive illusions. It is also true in the Amaranth case, in which the witness was considered particularly reliable despite inconsistencies in his narrative. This erroneous idea often leads the investigators to not seek other persons able to confirm or invalidate the declarations of those witnesses.

The lack of long-term follow-up is also obvious in the files. Once an inquiry is over, its conclusions are hardly ever called into question, even when new elements arise to possibly explain an unsolved case. That is what happened in the Nort-sur-Erdre case (September 7, 1987), in which a young boy recorded the noise of a mysterious bright object he allegedly saw. The witness admitted in 2005 that he committed a hoax.

poor research methodology.

But let’s end on a positive note: notably since the publication of our critical work about its functioning, GEIPAN has started to correct some of its errors during the past year and has shown a change in its assessments, the immediate consequence being the drastic drop in the number of new D classified UAP. Patenets also agreed this autumn (2008) to check the explanatory hypotheses we proposed to him for dozens of cases wrongly classified as D. The total percentage of unexplained cases—curiously announced as reaching 28 percent at the launch of GEIPAN’s Web site—should thus soon decrease and arrive at a rate more representative of the actual contents of the files. □

NOTES

1. Yves Sillard (editor), *Phénomènes aérospatiaux non identifiés, un défi à la science*, Paris: le Cherche-Midi, 2007 (in French).

2. David Rossoni, Eric Maillot et Eric Déguillaume, *Les OVNI du CNES: 30 ans d’études officielles (1977–2007)*, Valbonne: Book-e-Book, 2007 (in French). Foreword by Jean-Pierre Swings (University of Liege, Belgium); postscript by Jean Brimont (University of Louvain-la-Neuve, Belgium). Available online at www.book-e-book.com.

3. GEIPAN’s official Web site: www.cnes-geipan.fr (in French).

4. Jim Wilson, “When UFOs land,” *Popular Mechanics*, May 2001.

5. Many of the strangest cases are due to mistaking observations of helicopters for UAP. These material “nuts and bolts” objects move in all directions (vertically, laterally, and longitudinally), fly slowly just above the ground, and land and take off obliquely or straight up, in various places inaccessible to planes. They are equipped with navigation lights, landing lights, anticollision lights (strobe lights) of different colors, and sometimes powerful searchlights. Under certain conditions of observation and circumstances, they can provide astonishing visions.